

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

A REMOTE POSSIBILITY

WILL REMOTE WORK BE THE NEW NORMAL
AFTER THE COVID-19 CRISIS?



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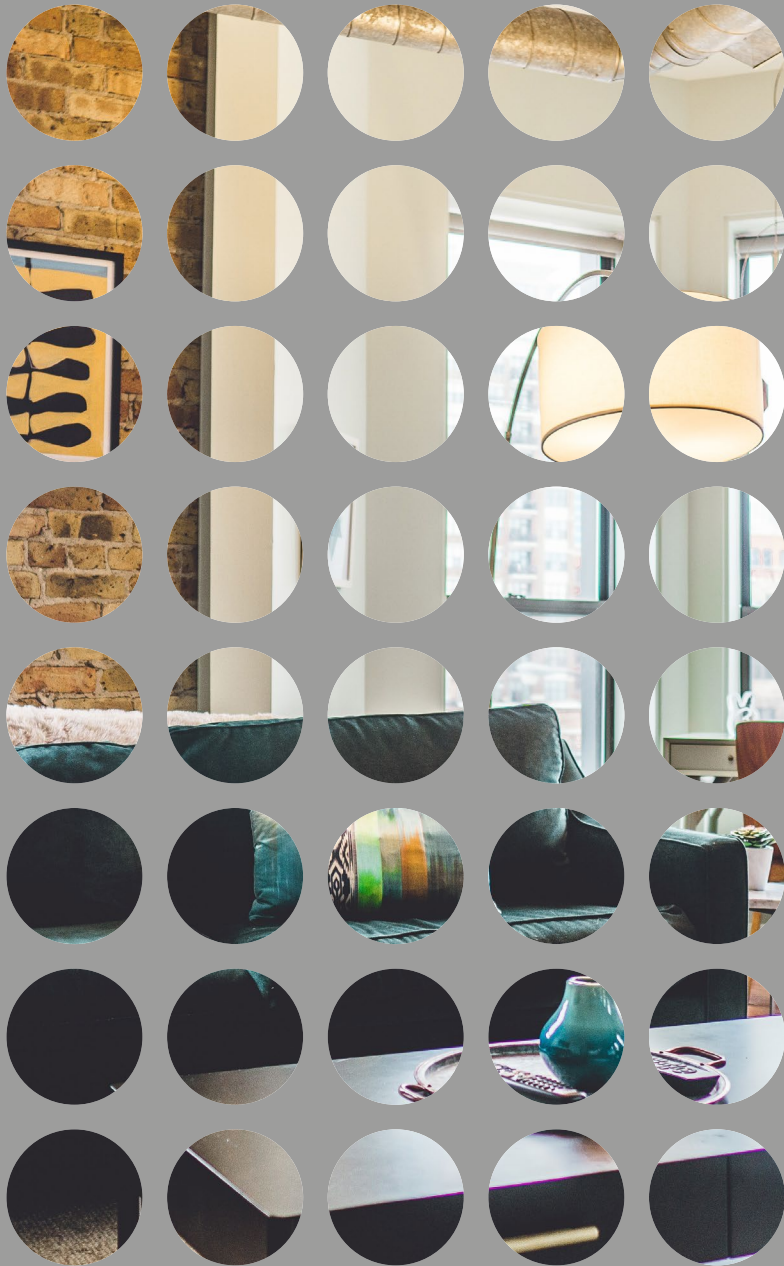


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The COVID-19 crisis has overnight forced millions of people in organizations into new patterns of working. Instead of commuting to offices every day, employees have sat down to do their work in makeshift home offices and spent countless hours videoconferencing with their colleagues, managers and clients. How are employees dealing with this forced shift to remote work? And what will happen when the immediate crisis is over – will remote work be the new normal and, if so, what considerations do employers need to make?

Remote work before the COVID-19 crisis

Technology that enables flexible work independent of time and place has existed since the 1970s and the increasing pace of developments in mobile and virtual technologies has made remote work easier by the day. The transition towards more flexible ways of working has nonetheless been surprisingly slow. In 2016, 2% of the work force in Sweden reported mainly working from home, and another 13% occasionally working from home. This was very similar to the situation in 2007 – despite a rapid technological development during the period (1).

From the perspective of the individual employee, remote work can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, flexible work gives employees more freedom to balance work and life as needed (2), for instance by decreasing time spent commuting and facilitating the management of personal and family issues. At the same time, the constant connectivity that technology enables, even imposes, has implications for employee well-being as it often results in increased feelings of stress and pressure. The responsibility to draw boundaries between work and life is increasingly shifted to employees, but this is not always easy to do.

However, what seems to have been a key reason for why the shift to remote work has been slow is not the trade-offs experienced by employees, but rather the attitudes of line managers. An ongoing study (3) reveals that despite organizational expectations on employees to manage and take responsibility for their own work, the organization does not

always provide them with necessary flexibility to do so, in terms of the time and place in which work is carried out. Deeply ingrained mindsets and practices, such as measuring performance by time spent in the office and disbelieving that remote workers work as much as those in the office, are still surprisingly prevalent, especially among line managers, and act as barriers to new ways of working.

Remote work during the COVID-19 crisis

While the research discussed above has been conducted in settings where remote work is voluntary, the full-scale, real-time experiment brought on by the COVID-19 crisis has forced many into working and leading at a distance. In the Stockholm area somewhere between 60% and 80% of employees are estimated to have been working from home (4). How are employees faring? A survey conducted by the Swedish survey- and action platform Brilliant Future in April 2020 gives some preliminary indications¹. The immediate sense was that employees were holding up better than might be expected. 87% of the respondents reported that they were able to maintain the same level of engagement as usual. 94% of the respondents said that they felt able to contribute effectively to the organization. 96% perceived their manager to be easy or very easy to reach, and 94% reported that they were collaborating well or very well with their colleagues. There were indications, however, that maintaining work-life balance was an issue.

A closer investigation of these data reveals that, in the context of forced remote work, engagement seems to a large extent to be about removing barriers (technical ones as well as ones related to finding information) as well as reducing conflict between work and life. This is a pressing issue for many in a situation where their homes have suddenly transformed into office spaces and where, at the same time, other

¹ The data set was gathered by Brilliant Future and encompasses survey responses from 450 employees collected in Sweden in April 2020. It was shared with the authors of this text, who are responsible for the analysis presented here. Brilliant Future is a data-driven action platform that measures and analyzes customer- and employee experiences, consistently showing that engaged employees translate into loyal customers.

family members, including children, are spending more time (see also the contribution by Frida Perner on boundary management).

Remote work after-COVID-19: some takeaways for HR

While people have been forced to master remote work during the COVID-19 crisis, this is no guarantee for the feasibility of continuing the same pattern of work after the crisis. The recent months of remote work in many organizations provide a good basis for questioning established ways of thinking about where and when work can be done efficiently. While it has demonstrated where space may be easily bridged by technology, it has also served to highlight the instances in which face-to-face meetings are superior and what the challenges in working and leading at a distance are.

Crisis situations inevitably expose organizational weaknesses. The HR function has a key role in helping the organization capitalize on learnings from the COVID-19 crisis, which provides a good opportunity to reflect on what aspects of daily organizational practice and routines have worked well and which have less so. Learning is not automatic, and in order for it to happen we encourage HR to engage in in-depth reflection on questions such as ‘What has worked well during the crisis?’, ‘What can we learn about the conditions of remote work in our organization?’, ‘What weaknesses in work practices have surfaced during the crisis?’, ‘What aspects of work are difficult to deal with remotely?’, ‘What new skills and structures are needed to better support remote work’ and ‘How have mindsets and attitudes towards remote work shifted (or been cemented) during the crisis?’.

The COVID-19 crisis may lead to a shift in prevalent mindsets, such that remote work becomes more broadly acceptable to individual managers and employees in the future. Employees who have realized and experienced the benefits of remote work may wish to continue working remotely one or two days a week, and line managers may also be more open to it after having had more positive experiences than expected during COVID-19. It is however important to keep in mind that an or-

ganization adopting remote work as a practice simply because it has been forced to does not necessarily imply that it can or should continue to do so in the long run. Coping with a forced work practice for a limited amount of time should not automatically be assumed to be synonymous with efficiency in the longer term. Organizations should be wary of rushing to draw premature conclusions based on the unique context provided by the COVID-19 crisis, and not lose sight of long-term consequences of increasingly flexible work, such as the increased blurriness of work time and leisure time that is inevitably connected with remote work or the risks of tensions and communication gaps between those working remotely and those physically present in the office.

Concluding thoughts

The COVID-19 crisis is still ongoing as we write, and the discussion and empirical survey data above reflect an immediate response to the situation. It may well be that the collective sense of being in the midst of a world-encompassing crisis of historic proportions brings out an empathetic and idealistic response that (temporarily) buffers more negative reactions. As has been reported by e.g. the World Economic Forum (5) it is likely that if remote work remains enforced, there is a serious risk in the long-term of increased levels of burnout and stress-related outcomes. Still, the immediate picture that emerges of employees coping well with remote work seems to strengthen the thesis that one of the main reasons why change towards remote work has been slow in coming has been entrenched mindsets, especially those of managers. These mindsets have been tested during the past few weeks, and the crisis may very well prove to be a catalyst for the general adoption of new flexible ways of working. As work inevitably shifts towards increasing flexibility in terms of where and when it can be carried out, incorporating key learning points from the COVID-19 crisis may provide help in the transformation towards a more sustainable working life with a focus on the holistic well-being of employees.

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